

BENEDIKT BÖHM



SUPERHERO

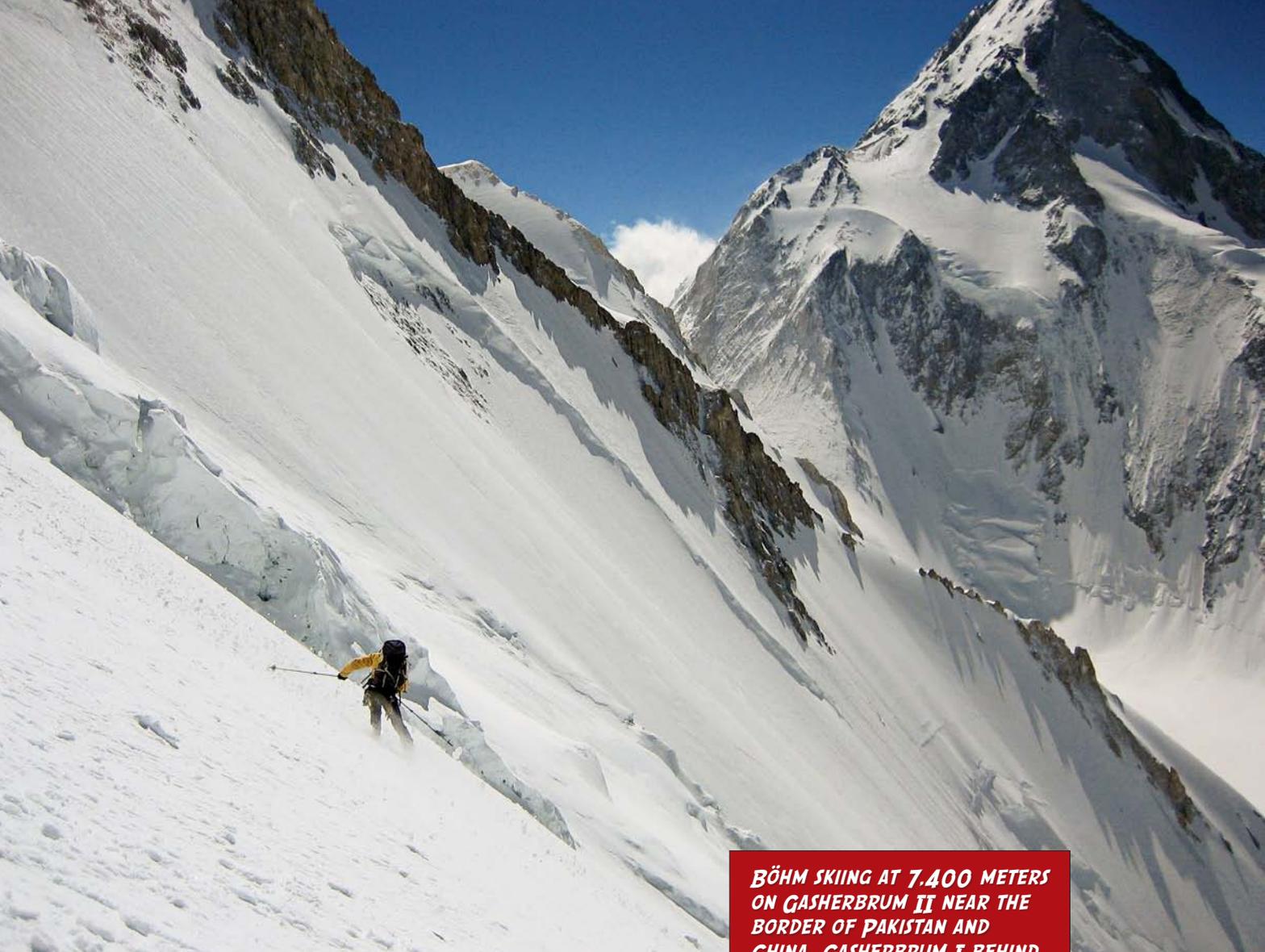


*WORLD-CLASS ATHLETE, OXFORD-EDUCATED BUSINESSMAN,
CHISELED ADONIS, SAVIOR OF THE DYNAFIT BRAND AND
LEADER OF A GLOBAL TOURING REVOLUTION:
ALL BENEDIKT BÖHM LACKS IS A CAPE.*

BY DEVON O'NEIL



BENE BÖHM LEAPS ROCKS AND SHRUBS IN A SINGLE BOUND WHILE TRAINING NEAR LERMOOS, AUSTRIA.



BÖHM SKIING AT 7,400 METERS ON GASHERBRUM II NEAR THE BORDER OF PAKISTAN AND CHINA. GASHERBRUM I BEHIND.

THE AFTERNOON FOG IS THICKER THAN MILK, and we have no idea where we're going. But Benedikt Böhm, the general manager and top sponsored athlete of the ski-mountaineering brand Dynafit, doesn't seem to mind. We just keep skinning up the Italian piste, Böhm in a one-piece Lycra speed suit, me in baggy pants and a soft shell. I'm struggling to maintain Böhm's pace, which he kindly estimates to be 20 percent of his top speed. Time is of the essence, as it usually is with Böhm, who follows an absurdly busy schedule from his home in Munich, Germany. After a few minutes of listening to my panting, he politely offers to hold my tape recorder up to his own mouth, to speed up our progress.

Böhm and I are climbing San Pellegrino Pass to talk about his singular position in the ski industry. At just 34, he runs a smoking-hot company that dominates the backcountry market in Europe and is plotting to do the same in North America; in his spare time, he skis monstrous Himalayan peaks faster than anyone in the world. He's like a bc superhero—tights and all.

I first met Böhm when he pulled up to my hotel after a busy morning of meetings that had taken him from Germany to Austria to his boss's office in the Italian Dolomites. He was in full business mode—sharply dressed in a sweater, button-down shirt, jeans and leather shoes—and deep in cell-phone conversation. He said a quick something in Italian to the girl at the front desk then ducked into a hallway near the lobby, where he began to undress. Considering Böhm is

chiseled, blonde and dashing—with an elite pedigree and ridiculously suave charisma—I could forgive the front-desk girl for glancing over.

Böhm emerged a few minutes later in a spandex one-piece—Superman to his previous Clark Kent—and grinned as he collected his skis and poles from the back of his Audi. “I brought a racing suit, but don't worry,” he said, his grin stretching wider as he sensed my alarm. “Don't be scared, OK?”

I'd heard that Böhm, an ex-World Cup randonnéer racer, climbs 3,600 vertical feet per hour. His ski setup, including both boots, both bindings and both skis, weighs four and a half pounds—the same as one of my skis. I tried to forget that as we began running up the piste behind the hotel. “This is my performance setup, for training,” Böhm said as we dodged tourists carving through the afternoon slush. “You don't need a powder ski when you train most of the time between three and six a.m., because everything is hard. You just need something that's good on the icy, windblown stuff.”

Böhm believes that we are at the outset of a ski-touring revolution, one that will see hundreds of thousands of skiers move away from resorts and into the backcountry, destined to become “Dynafit Snow Leopards.” “Alpine skiing is not sexy anymore,” he explains. Not surprisingly, he sounds as convincing as he looks. Maybe it's the Oxford degree (which he paid for by waiting tables at Munich's Oktoberfest). Or maybe it's the fact that since he started working for Dynafit in 2003, the company's revenue has increased from \$3.5 million to \$52 million annually.



**TOP: BÖHM AS A CHILD (MIDDLE LEFT).
BOTTOM: CLIMBING GÄSHERBRUM II IN 2006.
RIGHT: "SPEEDING UP" NEAR GREBENSTEIN, GERMANY.**



Still, despite all that he's achieved in business and on snow—including a game-changing, 10,000-foot ski descent in China and four expeditions to 8,000-meter peaks—Böhm's greatest challenge may still be ahead of him. Dynafit, a light-and-fast brand built around one of the most ingenious binding designs in skiing history, is still something of a nascent trend in North America, despite vast potential. Those who know it swear by it—and the company's "Speed Up" mantra—but North American backcountry ski culture is hardly on par with that of Europe, where ski touring is as rooted in Alpine lore as are cheese and wine. Here, Böhm says, is where his touring revolution stands to gain the most momentum. "North America has become our key focus."

AS BÖHM GLIDES UP THROUGH THE DOLOMITI FOG, his credentials quickly take a back seat to his persona, which is unfailingly upbeat despite the high-pressure crush of his job and a training schedule which consumes up to 20 hours a week. He sleeps an average of five hours per night, but remains energetic and engaged, zipping around like a hummingbird. "I've never seen him stressed or in a bad mood," says his sister Christiane, one of Böhm's five siblings.

We pass the top lift terminal and continue higher into wild snow. Neither of us knows where we were going; visibility is only 10 feet. But Böhm is clearly more at ease than he was five minutes ago. "I hate going on pistes with people skiing everywhere," he says, effortlessly

supporting his weight with his calves—sans climbing bars—as the slope steepens. "I grew up on backcountry snow. For me, it's the only time I don't take my cell phone, the only time I'm reflecting, the only time I'm completely on my own. It's also when I make a lot of business decisions, a lot of private decisions, and I don't want to see anybody. Except when I'm with friends."

During the winter, Böhm skis an average of five days a week. Two or three of them involve summiting the highest mountain in Germany, 9,718-foot Zugspitze, alone in the dark. He will drive out of downtown Munich, climb 8,200 feet in two hours and 15 minutes, then ski down. He's at his desk by 9 a.m. those days. He also drives 600 miles a week for his job, which can be a problem—he gets so many speeding tickets, he loses his license almost every year. Even when making the 15-minute commute to his office, he regularly touches 120 mph on the speedometer.

Almost every element of Böhm's life represents his brand's "Speed Up" motto. One of his best friends and most trusted ski partners, a veterinarian named Basti Haag, refers to intrusions on Böhm's desired efficiency as "time burglars." Be they "slow people" or simply factors beyond his control, nothing drives him crazier than wasted time. His friends have no choice but to abide by the same principle.

"I do feel like you have to be young to hang out with him," says Monique Merrill, a Dynafit-sponsored skier from Colorado. "Last year when I went over and did the PDG [Patrouille des Glaciers, a biannual



BÖHM AND SIDEKICK BASTI HAAG CLIMBING GRUBENSPITZE, AN HOUR FROM DYNAFIT HEADQUARTERS IN MUNICH, GERMANY.

team race from Zermatt to Verbier], we did the race, partied, slept a little that night, then we went to a house in Chamonix, got up at 3:30 a.m., climbed and skied Mont Blanc, and got down at 11:30 that morning. Then Bene went to work. And that kind of story happens every weekend.”

Böhm, the fifth of six children in a tight-knit family, has been restless since he was young—“always moving like a jumping jack,” says Dynafit Product Manager Schorsch Nickaes, who raced with Böhm on the German national team. His parents stuck him in a cross-country club when he was 10 to harness his spunk, which led to a stint in an elite military rando unit when Böhm was in his early 20s. He got sick of racing with a gun, and he didn’t want to go to war, but he loved the training and lifestyle, so he continued to compete after Oxford. He

qualified for the national team and spent four years on the World Cup, peaking with a handful of top-10 finishes—no small feat among the mutants in that crowd.

In 2003, the year he made his World Cup debut, Böhm saw his first Dynafit binding. “I said, ‘Hey, man, what is that binding? Are you crazy?’” Before that, Böhm had never heard of Dynafit, which at the time was a struggling brand used almost exclusively by racers. But fate was at work. Salewa bought Dynafit the same year, and Heiner Oberrauch, Salewa’s owner, needed someone ambitious to work as a sales rep in Bavaria. Böhm’s name came up, and he was offered a job, which he accepted.

But even while his racing and business careers were taking off,



**TOP: RANDO ROOTS; FINISHING THE PATROUILLE DES GLACIERS.
MIDDLE: CLARK KENT ON QUALITY CONTROL.
BOTTOM: REFUELING ABOVE THE ALETSCHE GLACIER, SWITZERLAND.**

Böhm made time to explore high-altitude mountaineering. He and Haag, a technically gifted skier whom he'd known since they were kids in Munich, flew to Peru in 2004 to explore the Cordillera Blanca. "We did everything wrong that we could," Böhm remembers. "No acclimatization, avalanches, Basti had a lung edema, we had frozen feet, too-small boots, no support through donkeys—we were carrying everything ourselves because we were super proud, most of the time. We'd already run out of food once we arrived at the mountain."

They still notched some impressive descents, and more importantly, they learned from their mistakes. So when a mountain guide approached Böhm at a World Cup race in Andorra the next year and asked if he and Haag wanted to join an expedition to Mustagh Ata in

China, they committed. With no technical crux besides altitude, Böhm and Haag decided the 24,757-foot peak offered a perfect opportunity to test an idea. "Of course you always try to be fast," Böhm says, "but we looked at the mountain and said, 'OK, we want to do that in 12 hours.' And at that time, this kind of approach was really experimental: no tents, super low equipped, two liters of water. We had no idea whether it was going to work."

During an acclimatization jaunt from Camp 2 to C3, Böhm and Haag felt good enough that they simply continued to the summit. While descending, they spotted two specks in the middle of a snowfield around 7,000 meters. They found a pair of climbers who'd been caught in a blizzard the night before—the woman was already dead, but the

“IT TOOK US ONE HOUR AND 10 MINUTES TO SKI DOWN MUSTAGH ATA,” BÖHM SAYS. “IF YOU WALK DOWN, IT TAKES AT LEAST TWO DAYS.”



LEFT: BASTI FOLLOWS BÖHM IN THE NORTHERN ITALIAN ALPS. RIGHT: BÖHM LEADS BY EXAMPLE ON THE SUMMIT OF GASHERBRUM II. OPPOSITE: SUPERMAN FLYING LOW. ALL PHOTOS: DYNAFIT INTERNATIONAL

man was hanging on. Böhm skied down to C3 and grabbed a sleeping bag, then rushed back up to where Haag was trying to revive the climber. They wrapped the man in the bag and skied him down to a doctor at C3. He died that night despite their heroic effort. Böhm and Haag proceeded down to base camp, exhausted physically and mentally, but undeterred. They were still determined to make a speed attempt.

Three days later, they started at midnight and ascended more than 10,000 vertical feet in nine hours and 37 minutes, then skied off the summit back to base camp, finishing in a total time of 10:47. “It took us one hour and 10 minutes to ski down,” Böhm says. “If you walk down, it takes at least two days. That was kind of a tipping point for us. We were completely hyped. The Chinese television came and interviewed us; we were invited for big dinners. Papers wrote about it in Germany, and also in Europe. It was really a big thing because nobody tried—of course, what Kammerlander did on Everest was going very much in this direction—but nobody had tried to adapt the rando-racing style onto big mountains. That was our goal.”

BÖHM HAS SINCE MADE FOUR SPEED ATTEMPTS on 8,000-meter peaks, succeeding on Gasherbrum II and retreating twice on Broad Peak and once on Manaslu. You could argue that his “Speed Up” mentality is irresponsible—it stung him and Haag on Broad in 2009, when a burst water bladder and unexpectedly deep snow left them high and exposed, and they were forced to duck into another team’s tent to survive. But Böhm’s purist views are as strong as his lungs. Most important: he would never take oxygen into the death zone, a decision that has nothing to do with weight.

“If we cannot stand 8,000-meter peaks,” he says simply, “then we should not go there.” Haag, for his part, equates the use of supplemen-

tal oxygen to “doing a marathon with rollerblades.” Much of why they are so adamant is because they come from Bavaria, where ski-mountaineering principles are rooted in hardness and tradition. Böhm and his colleagues have branded Dynafit around similar ideals, its latest identity in a roller-coaster existence that stretches back six decades.

For a long time, the company made its living in boots—Franz Klammer won a bunch of World Cup downhills using Dynafits in the ’70s—but it slipped toward irrelevancy in the early ’80s. About that time, an Austrian college student named Fritz Barthel had an epiphany while skinning up Mont Blanc. Fed up with his heavy gear, he set out to design a lightweight, frameless binding system.

He named his invention the Low Tech (intended to mock society’s zest for “high tech”) and drove around Europe trying to sell the patent to all the major binding manufacturers. He was only asking \$3,000, but because ski-touring represented roughly one percent of the market at the time, none of them bit. Undeterred, Barthel continued making the bindings in his basement.

He sold a few pairs to local mountain guides, one of whom encouraged Barthel to show off his invention at a rando race in Chamonix. Word spread, and a few weeks later, racers randomly began showing up at his family’s farmhouse to buy the bindings. Alas, sales never really took off—“Commercially, it was disastrous,” Barthel laughs—but just as he ran out of money, Dynafit offered to manufacture the system and pay him royalties. He was ecstatic.

That lasted until the brand nearly folded due to bad management. In fact, if it weren’t for Oberrauch—owner of Salewa and a lifelong ski mountaineer—becoming disgusted with his own heavy binding system in 2003, Dynafit may have disappeared. “We had insider knowledge,” jokes Oberrauch, who still leads international ski (continued on p. 91)



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expeditions at age 53. Not surprisingly, Böhm shared his boss's vision. "When I joined Dynafit, it was bankrupt, it was bad, there was nothing," Böhm says. "The only thing that convinced me was the binding. It was unbelievable. There was such potential."

Böhm drove all over Germany and brought dealers up to huts to experience the binding themselves. He was relentless; as soon as one group was headed down, another was headed up. "Bene was the guy who tried to keep Dynafit alive," Nickaes says. "He was doing everything: sales, marketing, product development. Many dealers said the only reason they kept Dynafit was because of Bene. They were so impressed by his strength and his charisma."

The momentum grew, largely because Oberrauch, Böhm and marketing guru Reiner Gerstner only hired mountain guides and racers who, like themselves, were already entrenched in the sport. "You can never buy the soul," Oberrauch says. "You have to understand the product and the people. You have to be inside."

Building on the success of their bindings—annual sales have jumped from 3,000 pairs in 2003 to more than 80,000 now, even as other companies have scrambled to copy Barthel's design—they recruited top Italian developers from Garmont to strengthen their boot line (now the most profitable line in the company) and began making skis in Austria. Healthy margins at Dynafit and across the entire Salewa group allow the company to spend amply on R&D, which is key to Oberrauch's family business model. "We think in generations," he says, "instead of just the next quarter."

BÖHM, WHO REMAINS "DYNAFIT'S MOST important face," according to Oberrauch, knows it'll take a different strategy to succeed in North America than the one they've employed in the Alps. For instance, instead of pushing skinny skis and 110-gram bindings, Dynafit developed wider skis and stouter boots and bindings specifically for North American skiers like Greg Hill, Chris Davenport, Glen Plake and Eric Hjørleifson. "These guys are looking for something that is not there yet," Böhm says. "They see more potential."

Böhm's personal goals are changing as well. Two years ago, when we first spoke, he told me that the amount of sleep he got each night "depends on which girlfriends I have." He still works 60 hours a week and trains like an Olympic racer, but in August 2010, he married a woman he grew up with, and they had a son, Balthasar, one month later. His wife, Veronika, wants two or three more kids. They're thinking about leaving their downtown flat and buying a house in the suburbs. Böhm went so far as to tell Haag he no longer wants to climb ice faces or ski really steep walls. "He's not hungry for risk anymore," Haag says. "We've talked about it."

Nevertheless, Böhm is planning another speed attempt for the fall of 2012, on 26,864-foot Cho Oyu, the world's sixth-tallest mountain. "It's already inside me," he says. "There's no night where I go to bed without thinking about my next expedition. There's no morning when I get up without the goal in mind. This is what motivates me; I wouldn't have this drive if I didn't have these big-picture goals."

Back on San Pellegrino Pass, we feel the snow grow hollow as we skin up a steep pitch, still lost in the clouds. The conditions are telling us to stop, so we do, but Böhm is bummed. "It's a pity. That could have been a nice peak for us," he says. He rips his skins and we linger for a few minutes, hoping visibility might return. No such luck. When it's time to go, Böhm taps his poles, points his tips downhill and skis into the dense fog, spinning 360s to keep himself entertained. ■